The Nature of God

THE NATURE OF GOD

●

NO. 4 OF A SERIES

DELIVERED SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 25, 1945

by

DUNCAN E. LITTLEFAIR, B.D., Ph.D.
Minister of
FOUNTAIN STREET BAPTIST CHURCH
GRAND RAPIDS, - MICHIGAN

VOL. I NO. 5

THE NATURE OF GOD

A Series of Sermons for Inquiring Minds

February 4th—
THE PLACE OF REASON IN RELIGION
Why should we analyze or criticize or compare?
Is one religion as good as another?

* February 11th—
IS THERE A PLACE IN RELIGION FOR THE SUPERNATURAL?
What is the relationship of natural law to religious thought?

February 18th—
CAN WE PROVE THE EXISTENCE OF GOD?
What are the traditional arguments?
Is there any value in humanism?

* February 25th—
THE NATURE OF GOD
An attempt to specifically describe the nature of God.

* March 4th—
IS GOD A PERSON?
A consideration of the traditional problems concerning the "personality" of God.

March 11th—
THE INJUSTICE OF GOD

* March 18th—
DOES GOD ANSWER PRAYER?

March 25th—
THE PSYCHOLOGICAL APPROACH TO GOD

* It is suggested that these sermons are most important for the development of the theme.

The Nature of God

● This will be a very homely sermon, much more so than most, if not all the others in the series. That means I shall be dealing with the things that are common. God ought to be common. That further means that unless you are willing to think it through God will still remain common and unknown to you. You see we are most unaware of the things that are most common. Man doesn't realize how much he is dependent upon the air until it is taken away from him. He accepts it. He never thinks about it. I imagine the fish that swims in the water, if it could think and feel in that way, would also be quite ignorant of the reality in which it swam, and so it is with God. He lives in us and you live in Him. He is the most important and the most common thing in the world to you. The only difficulty is that most of us have been, are, and probably shall continue to live in Him in ignorance of Him.

Now there are four possibilities for the location of God. I shall mention them but briefly. First of all, God may be everything. This is known in religious and philosophic circles as Pantheism. God is everything, and so you worship trees and rivers and cows, pigs, thunder and lightning and other men, fire, and so on, with more or less equal devotion because everything is an example, illustration or expression of God. This we have long ago discarded and it is no longer a serious claimant to attention insofar as it should be obvious that if God is everything, He is nothing. If He is everything, you might just as well disregard Him because there is nothing distinctive about Him, and nothing particular that you must seek out and conform to.

Now the second idea is that God is supernatural, this is to say He is something beyond all existence. He started this world and some think that He hasn't interfered with it since He began it. Others, and this is the more common viewpoint, think that he does interfere when and as He pleases, but still God is not to be identified with anything in this world. Whenever you find God, you find Him as an insertion into this world. That is the supernatural viewpoint, which we have already rejected in this series, at least to our own satisfaction.

● The third viewpoint is that there is no God, and this is known to you as humanism. We have referred to it on occasion. The humanist, tiring of supernatural delights and descriptions of things that couldn't be known, decided they would eliminate God altogether, and they would even eliminate religion, because if that was religion, and if God had to do with these unknowables that not only could not be proven but were logically unsound and contradictory, then, as intelligent people, they wanted nothing to do with Him or with the religion which purported to worship Him. I find that I have a great deal of sympathy with this viewpoint and I think most of you do too. But, as we suggested, it was a reaction, and it wasn't plumbed thoroughly. Unfortunately the humanists didn't dig deep enough into the meaning and validity of the things that they did find good in order to discover what it was in the universe that caused such good or supported it or made it possible.

The fourth possibility is that God be a part of this world. I should like to make clear at this time that I shall be using language in very blunt fashion. There may be a tendency to think that I am speaking in a figurative manner at times. This will not be the case. I shall mean what I say. God is a part of this universe! He is as real as the building in which we are gathered. He is as real as the people you love. He is as important and real to you as the air you breathe. God may be identified as a piece of this world's stuff.

Now, what is God? We shall, first of all, give a general definition because in any investigation you must offer some specific description of what you are seeking. We offer this suggestion: God is that in the universe which is most worthful to human existence, here and now! Not to some other life and some other sphere, but to life here and now! We have said that He is the most worthful. We have not said He is the nicest reality! We have not said He is the most pleasant! We have not said He is that which most men desire! We have not said He is that which most men think Him to be! We have said He is by actual test the most worthful piece of reality to Man in his life on this planet!

What is that most worthful reality? Now that we have established the laws of our search we must set about discovering the particular reality, if any, that meets the requirements already established. We make the suggestion that God is Love. You will recall that this was the inspiration and insight of the writer of the epistle of John when he said: "God is Love, and when men

love, they are in God, and God is in them. If a man loves, he knows God; and if he doesn't love, he doesn't know God. God is Love."

You will remember that these past weeks we have been discussing the importance of interpretation in religion. We have been saying that we have no quarrel with the idea that God exists. When we quarrel with another religious group we are not questioning the existence of God but their interpretation of Him. When we call into question the experience of an individual or group we are not disputing the reality, vividness or value of the experience but that person or group's interpretation of the experience. We question only his understanding of his experience.

Now how does this idea that God is Love, not that He causes Love, or that He likes Love, or that He sanctions it, but that He is It, how does that fit in with tradition and religious history? Well, I think that it fits in with all the religious experience of Mankind not merely Christian experience! If God be God, he must be the God of all Men, and the religious experience of people alien to us and separated by long distance and great time must still be the God that we discover. Since God is so important and so common, there has never been a time when men haven't known Him. At least there has never been a time when they haven't depended on Him or experienced Him, but you see it is so difficult to interpret your experience. And so these men who experienced God back in the beginning of our religion were experiencing the same God that we are experiencing, but this doesn't mean to say that their interpretation of that experience was right! It doesn't mean to say that they have the privilege of dictating to us just how God is to be thought of! Their experience of Him may be much deeper than ours, but our understanding of Him may be much greater than theirs! Now I am not choosing between those in the matter of value. I am trying to state the simple fact that however much my statement about God may differ from traditional statements that you have heard, nevertheless, the experience that I try to describe, nay, the reality that I am trying to clarify, is the same thing that they, in their own way, tried to interpret.

● Now I want to give some illustrations of what I mean in this regard. I never have any pride or confidence in illustrations. I always approach them with fear and trembling, but I trust that this time they will show what I mean. You may think some

night that you love all your fellow-men, and you may think that you are experiencing a deep and abiding affection for people, but you may be experiencing only the results of a drink or two too many. You may, on the other hand, feel that you hate people, they are unpleasant, they grate you on, they annoy you, and they are not nice. You may be experiencing only an upset, nervous stomach, not really an abiding dislike of people. You are defining and expressing a physical condition. You may think that a youngster is a little slow and dull, and you have seen evidence for his slowness, but you discover one day that he is not slow and dull. He just needed a pair of glasses. The same evidence with a different interpretation. A person may even be "queer", and his "queerness" is there for everyone to see. You may say he doesn't have a mind, at least he doesn't have a good mind, and yet all he lacks on careful analysis and proper interpretation is a better thyroid balance.

● You may be out on a hunting trip. Now I am in the realm of these simple things that are awfully important. I am trying to describe God. You may be out on a hunting trip, and you may have a marvelous time, you and your comrades, and you may come back saying that there is nothing in the world like hunting. It is the finest expereince a man can have! Now you are not describing the experience of hunting. You are really talking about the comradeship and the joy and the delight of doing something together with your fellowmen, with people who are free and easy and understand one another and work together in a spirit of mutual aid and cooperation. There is harmony and a feeling of oneness in the group. But you could have had that same experience on a fishing trip or on a sporting team. You could have had that same experience in your family, or in your local golf club. You could have had it in your business, but because you have never seen it there, you figured it must be the hunting that was the cause of it. Without any question your experience was beautiful and important, but your analysis of that experience is open to very serious question.

A man looks at lightning, and he sees what it does to himself, to his friends or to his house or his barn or his crops, and he has an explanation of that lightning. Now, primitive man's explanation of that lightning is not my explanation, and it is not yours, and it's not that of the modern scientific world. We are looking at the same reality, but we are interpreting it in ways that are as far apart as the poles. There is no question about the reality, but a very serious question about your interpretation of it and what it really is. You see it; you feel it; you experience it; but do you know what it really is that you are experiencing? The experience in each case is just as vivid, just as real, and just as wonderful or devastating. In like manner you should relate the things that we say today about our religious experience to the things that people have said in another day, and don't lay a clamp on your mind! How utterly absurd to insist that modern man should interpret lightning in the same way that primitive man did. Then how equally ridiculous that we should interpret God in the same way that they did! And that goes for any man at any time.

Now what is Love? Up until now I have just given you a large general definition. You have to have that in order to proceed. But what really is this Love that we have claimed is God? Do you know what Love is? You have experienced it. Not a person in this room, not a person alive has not experienced it. But do you know what it is? Now this is a matter of importance. It is exceedingly important. It is not enough just to experience it. In this modern, complicated world of confusion and novelty in which there is no sustaining tradition to carry us on, we have got to understand these basic things in order to deal with them intelligently and guide ourselves through the maze of troubles that come to us. The more intelligent we are, the more effective we shall be. Of course religious excellence does not always follow increased learning but it should. In this confusing world we would do well to know as much as we can. The more complex the problem the more intelligently religious we must be.

Now, if God is something, then the more accurately we know Him, the more thoroughly we know Him, the better we shall be able to use Him. The more you know what electricity is, the better you can use it.

● In seeking to clarify love we should first be clear on the fact that it is not sexual attraction. Now it seems strange to have to say that, and yet you know that for the most part, in your own life, and certainly in our society, love is equated with sexual attraction. I don't know how much Hollywood is responsible for that, but it's probably only an expression of a general attitude of ignorance. You know that people don't fall in and out of love as they do in and out of sexual attraction. You must know that there ought to be more to this state called Love than that which animals experience! And yet people get divorced and married on that basis alone!

● Of course in our usual experience it begins with a sexual attraction. But that is only the beginning. It's the impetus toward the discovery and development of a state or relationship which may be termed one of Love. Love is a relationship that exists between two or more individuals such that what is important to the one is important to the other; so that what one holds important has value and significance for the other; such that they have an understanding and appreciation of values held by each other; and what's more, values held in common! It is a relationship in which the lives are more and more indistinguishable because of a growing unity. Immediately I hasten to go back and correct that by saying that of course the more unified those two lives become, the more beautiful is the individuality in each. In other words I am making only a partial correction in so much as the more those two people grow in Love, the more impossible it is to separate the one from the other because when you have one alone, he takes with him all of the things that he has shared with this woman he loves. The common experiences and associations have entered into his being. They have become a part of him, and his have become a part of her. Am I describing anything new? That's why a marriage properly understood grows in Love with the years. The strands and threads that tie the individuals together become more numerous and stronger. The values and strength of that relationship can never be lost. You can never destroy it. Death may do violence to the relationship by seeming to cut it as with a knife, but the one who lives on carries on with him, or her, that which was there before in common. That kind of Love isn't dependent on heightened sexual interest. Now I have dwelt longer on this than I meant, but I wanted it to be very clear.

What I have been describing is God. God is that relationship that exists between people such that what is important to one is important to all, that everything that anyone does in that relationship helps to sustain and deepen and enrich and encourage all that is done and valued by the others in the group. There is no conflicting of interest. There is no pulling apart and no selfishness. There is no seeking for one's own! There is an attempt on the part of everyone to see that the ties that bind are strengthened and encouraged and enriched and multiplied so that your life goes on in that rich multiplying way sharing in all the good of the entire group. I have found this thing sometimes most keenly in sporting groups. That's why I mentioned the hunting trip, but I know that those men who do go on them find most

of the value in this relationship that I am talking about. You ought to know it most richly in your home. Not very many do. And that's a problem that's at the same time simple and very difficult. But primarily it's not found there because men and women haven't understood, simple and old as it is, what Love really is.

We have brought God down to earth and pointed Him out as the most common and the most obvious thing. How far and how deep does it go? I want to talk about God on three levels now. This God that I have been speaking to you about is not a creation of human beings. It belongs to the universe. It exists on the sub-human level. It exists a way down below all normal life, not merely human life, but below all life of any kind. God is that relationship that ties pieces of matter together and makes them inter-dependent, dependent on each other.

You know that matter is made up of atoms, and that those atoms are comprised of smaller entities called electrons — those are the negative charges — and a number of other positive charges, and some which seem to be indifferent. Each atom is distinguished by the correlation of the negative and positive charges. One substance differs from another in its basic nature by the relationship of those negative and positive charges in that little piece of matter called the atom. But regardless of that correlation, there is an integration within that smallest piece of matter so that when you separate the negative charges from the positive, they begin to look for an opposite pull to cling to. They have to exist in relationship to each other. When you destroy that relationship, you destroy that atom as such.

Now you could move up through that to animate matter. There is a connection between this inanimate atomic structure and organic structure, but what it is, does not seem to be very clear as yet. So let's start with the simple cell. All life starts with a cell, and then that single cell divides or brings to it another one, and multiplies and so they grow, and you have collections of cells; and then you have that collection of cells forming itself in a particular way and you have an organism, and by an organism you mean a group of cells so arranged that they are all interdependent on each other. There are higher and lower organisms. The higher the organism, the more interdependent are the parts of that organism, and the more capacity it has for creative cooperation and interaction.

● The human being is the highest form of organic life, because it is the most closely coordinated and integrated form of life.

The human being is not as keen-eyed, sharp-nosed, strong or fast as many species, but he is more delicately and sensitively constructed. His very lack of specialized skill contributes toward this delicate balance. His great achievement is organic unity with a high degree of control. This sensitivity, control, responsiveness, and power of appreciation and understanding is due to the peculiar nervous system in man. We are speaking of the peculiar spinal column and well-developed brain. This is the central cleaning house of the organism and is what makes personality. That is to say it is what makes man, man. You remember we described personality as consisting of the ability of the individual to inter-act with other people, and character as consisting of the strength of that individual's organization around some one end. In every case, it is organization, inter-dependency around something, and the more well-ordered and integrated you are, the better personality you are, and the better character you are! And we have found that this goes all the way down to the atomic structure, and comes all the way up through the growing forms of life from a cell to group of cells, to organisms, to higher organism, always on the same principle, a principle of growing integration.

● I want to read to you a quotation which may or may not be helpful. It comes from a very eminent biologist:

"Animals, plants and bacteria collaborate in maintaining the balance of oxygen and nitrogen in the atmosphere. In addition to this, it should be emphasized that all animals are dependent for their food upon green plants and that almost every type of animal preys upon some other species, and is, at the same time, the food source of still other species. There is thus an intricate web of life, a complex pattern of inter-dependencies which may for a time reach a settled equilibrium." In this whole discussion the social note has predominated. It is our conviction that although life in the raw often seems to be utterly ruthless and brutally selfish, there is under it all another motif, that of mutual aid and cooperation. In its very nature life is cooperative.

When you change the level of the discussion to that of the relationship of one individual to another, you find the same principle valued and important. You can't live apart from people. You can't live without Love. You can't live unless you are a part of a group, and if you stop and examine yourself and your experiences, you will find that the most perfect in your life has been an experience of the unity of yourself with another person

or another group. It has been at a time when you felt a kinship and a oneness with others, or with life, or with all Mankind! That's Love. You shut an animal out of a group, and it dies. You shut a man out of a group, and he will die. He will kill himself. This wonderful human organism with all its possibilities, without creative interaction with others, is no better than that of an animal. You have heard stories of the wolf child and other such. Without the contacts with others, that is, without this inter-dependency with other people, this organism which can be so beautiful is nothing more than a drooling beast.

● Now how could you go on living if you didn't feel yourself a part of things? You find that people love or hate a community like Grand Rapids according to how they find themselves, in or out of the group life. Now their standard of what group they want to function in is usually pretty low. It is a group that has recognition or some other such thing, but if they want to get in that group, and they cannot, they suffer, and they hate the place. It is always the same in every community. Unless you can find a mutual kinship with others; unless you can find something that ties you to others and that makes your values their values so that you don't have to go on merely your own strength and judgment, you perish physically and spiritually. Now raise the discussion to the community level, and you find that unless the group is functioning as a real "community" in the sense described above, it is a poor place in which to live. To return to our illustration of a hunting trip, you know that whenever the members of such a group are constantly bickering and fighting and seeking for their own selfish ends the trip is a failure. A community living in that way is also a failure. And when you get a nation that is divided within itself, one part fighting against another; one section struggling for its own particular interest at the expense of others, you have a civil war, whether it be known as such or not. And when you get a world in which each state, each country is fighting for its own at the expense of others, in which there is always suspicion and quarreling and grasping for self, you have a world given over to war. We are discovering that that kind of a world will destroy itself! This world can no longer go on by individual nations seeking their own! We are too closely tied together! We didn't want to be, but we are! We didn't ask for it, and we didn't seek it out, but it is here! And only as we adjust to it will we find the meaning of the richness of life, and where we don't, we will destroy ourselves, because we refuse to pay attention to that upon

which all human life and all life is dependent. This growing inter-dependency of the world is the work of God. It is Love at work on a national or world wide basis. And we should know that one can't ignore God or fight against Him. When you do, you destroy yourself! That is the Nature of God!

● I want to read you something more. I am not sure how valuable this will be to you but I think it is one of the most significant paragraphs I have read. It comes in the middle of a long uninteresting book by Ludwig Lewissohn:

"I was persuaded that the lives of most of my friends and also my own, were lives that had no form in the sense in which we use the term in art. There was chaos because there was neither trend nor bound nor shaping Inner principle. Ambition was not enough, nor skill, nor pleasure, nor even a devotion to good causes. The coherence I wanted lay deeper, something to dwell with in hours of utter stillness, something to free the mind from a too complete slavery to fortune, something to sustain me if all the lights of Broadway were to go out and no more printed matter were to appear and all our wonted trades, excitements and petty triumphs and rivalries were to be engulfed in some unimaginable wave of darkness. An old, old cry, doubtless, this cry of mine after a principle of coherence."

There is a religious story that is remarkable in its simplicity. The story of a man crying for some principle of coherence, something over and above petty triumphs and rivalries, over and above his success and his failures, and the common way in which his life was cast; longing for something that would tie him into the nature of life itself, and give him coherence through giving him unity. He was seeking God. And it is so easy to find Him. It is so simple you overlook Him. He works in the atom; and He works in the animal; and He works in the human; and He works in the international sphere. He is active wherever life is found. He is that in which we live and move and have our being.

God is also on the superhuman level. I shouldn't say also. All of this is superhuman. I said that we didn't create this kind of a world. We don't like it. We don't want it. We have tried to run away from it. You remember I began by saying that the most worthful reality is not necessarily the nicest or the most desirable or the most attractive. But we have been trying to run away from the rigor of the conditions of life, from the sternness of the demands of God. We have been avoiding our obligations, forgetful of the fact that it is only an obligation if we want to live well or continue on the human level. You see, God is not dependent upon us. We didn't create Him. He created us. We are dependent on Him, but He will continue to work when man has destroyed himself through lack of concern for the source of his well-being.

A seed takes light and air and earth and puts it together into a new form and that's the form of a beautiful plant or simple lovely flower. Here is a single cell that grows into an organism, and there it is a squalling baby, kicking hands and feet, with eyes that see nothing. The baby exists in the family, and almost in spite of parents, grows. His eyes begin to focus and he sees things. He begins to find significance between one thing and another. He acquires a language. And all the time you just stand by and observe. Every once in a while, you take something away from the path of progress so that the growth will go on. You see, it isn't you that makes that growth. It's there as a natural part of life. All you do is stop to look at it, and when you look at it, you stop to marvel at it; and when you marvel at it, you begin to work to help it. You begin to seek to understand it so that you may help it to grow better and more beautifully and more perfectly. That's when you are working with God. And so from that little atomic structure up into the international life, you see, there is the growing tendency toward greater and greater inter-action; and now the whole world is the scene of Man's life; and what happens in China affects us in the same way than an ingrown toenail will hurt the whole body. The sweep and power and growth of God is there for all to see if only we would take heed.

● Now, what have we said about God? I am going to sum it all up by asking you some questions. Is this concept of God clear, simple and common? It ought to be clear, simple and common. Does it conform to the tests that we have already established in this series? That is to say, is it a part of this world? Is it something that you can actually experiment on? Have you ever tried experimenting with this reality I have described as Love? Try it sometime. Try thinking about the nature of Love; and then try to reorganize and redirect your life in a way that will produce more of that state than you already have and see what happens. You can test it. You can prove it for yourself though few of us ever test it consciously in this way. This is the best way but you don't have to test it personally. Sit down in your chair this afternoon and go back over history

as I have been doing so inadequately, and see if you don't find this force operating there.

● Is it the most important thing? Now you tell me anything that is more important! You bring to me at the discussion group this afternoon or any other time anything in life that is more important than Love. You try to discover anything other than this that you can build your life upon. Is it rooted in nature? Is it away down at the beginning? Is it in all human life here and now, everywhere at any time in the past, anywhere at any possible time in the future? You can't imagine a time without it! Is it more than Man can create? Is it something over and above and beyond and below him? Yes. You can't create Love. It is there for you to live on and to work on and to use, or you will be destroyed by it. Now, is it emotionally strong, warm and deep? That's the question that will bother most of us. Is this concept of God as good as the idea we have always had of the Fatherhood of God? Now remember that the term, "Fatherhood" of God is at any time only figurative. When you make it literal, you do violence to the thought. In this sense of the term what expression could be more appropriate to our concept. If we are dependent on this force we call God, if it created us, if it is the basis of personality, then the term "Fatherhood of God" is a very apt term. If Love is that which brings us all the tenderness and kindness and goodness and richness that we have ever experienced, how much more warm and emotional should it be, or could it be! Furthermore, should we go about seeking emotional stimulation or should we seek for what is true and important, and then honor that truth so deeply that it becomes emotionally significant.

Of course, there will be a time lag for a lot of us. It will be hard to pull out of old ideas. It will be painful to give up our primitive concepts, but even in the midst of the struggle, we should remember that it is worth the effort in the increased effectiveness of religious living that results. We must remember that the truth sets men free and only the truth will do this.

Now, is it worthy of our devotion? Is it sufficiently important to be a challenge? Is it big enough to be an object of faith? Not long ago I was driving back from a funeral service. The men in the car didn't know me, and I didn't know them. They were talking about the friend they had just buried. "He is gone," said one, "And that's the end". It is funny, isn't it, how at a funeral service everybody is on the same level; everyone

feels the same toward each other. I found myself very much impressed with the truth in his observation, particularly since he was not a well educated person. But then in the next sentence, he went on to say, "But you've got to go out into life again afterward, and you've got to get what is coming to you before the other fellow gets it." He added: "You don't want to do it, but, if you don't the other fellow will get you". Compare those two statements. This one thing he knew was good, but in the next sentence, he came up with the common standard of behavior based on a low animal level of achievement. He knew it wasn't good; and he knew he didn't like it; and he knew it wasn't the way in which men should live, but he said: "You've got to do it or he'll do it to you". Now if you think putting your faith in Love isn't a big enough job, you try it!